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3-D home market blurred by competing formats

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By Sue Zeidler - Analysis

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Now that 3-D movies are making a comeback, Hollywood and TV makers hope to take them to the living room, but competing technologies and the U.S. recession could blur the outlook.

A format war like the HD-DVD/Blu-ray battle that slowed adoption of high-definition home entertainment is the last thing anyone in Hollywood or the consumer electronics industry wants.

But efforts to arrive at a common solution by 2010, when a lot of 3-D TVs are expected to hit store shelves, have grown contentious behind the scenes, various industry members said.

Panasonic ([6752.T](#)) is among several manufacturers that have developed three-dimensional, high-definition (HD) televisions. It is one of several industry members working on a standards proposal to enable Hollywood studios to provide 3-D on discs uniformly -- providing everyone agrees.

"Our proposal is to provide a full high-definition 3-D experience as soon as next year if all the parts and players can advance together around a standard so that we can avoid a format war," said Peter Fannon, vice president of technology policy for Panasonic. "We're working with major Hollywood studios. Many are very interested in advancing 3-D technology and experimenting with 3-D," he said.


But it is no simple task since others like Mitsubishi ([8058.T](#)), Samsung ([005930.KS](#)), and Sharp ([6753.T](#)) have also developed advanced 3-D TVs. Fannon said Panasonic hoped to push for a 3-D standard through the Blu-ray Disc Association (BDA).

Various industry sources said the Blu-ray group was expected to make an announcement about some kind of 3-D framework as soon as May, although Blu-ray spokesman Andy Parsons sounded a cautious note.

"There are a lot of companies out there with a lot of technologies and a lot of 3-D solutions are being thrown around," he said. "There are no proposals yet in front of the BDA."

"I think everyone would love to see something happen, but it has to be done right," he said when asked how soon it would be before a Blu-ray 3-D film would arrive. "Nobody wants a format war and until we get something going, it's impossible to say."

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DIFFERING TECHNOLOGIES

Industry sources said tension brewed a few months ago between some manufacturers over differing 3-D technologies. Philips ([PHG.AS](#)), which had developed a no-glasses 3-D TV, recently abandoned the venture.

"We believe that over time, no-glasses based 3-D TVs will bring the ultimate 3-D experience to the home, but the point in time where mass adoption of no-glasses based 3-D TV will occur has shifted significantly because of current market developments," said a Philips spokesman.

"We will continue to evaluate the options to develop 3-D consumer televisions in the future, based on consumer demand and the latest consumer insights," he said.

Panasonic's 3-D system mirrors the system now in theaters, including the glasses that must be worn, and works by capturing two separate images from two different angles.

Aside from competing technologies that could confuse consumers, TV makers must convince Hollywood studios which way to go so they can have enough content to support the hardware.

Others also wonder if recession-strapped consumers who have just bought new flat-screen TVs will jump on the 3-D bandwagon. Nevertheless, 3-D is expected to be a hot topic at the upcoming National Association of Broadcasters conference and Fannon expects possible news on the broadcasting front.

Rick Doherty, analyst with Envisioneering, said Hollywood should move quickly on the film side. "3-D on disc can easily happen, so there is no reason to hold off, although it gets difficult when various committees are trying to define standards and electronics giants are posturing," he said.

David Wertheimer, executive director University of Southern California's Entertainment and Technology Center, said getting a home 3-D market up and running will be advantageous for studios, consumer electronics giants and even theaters.

"A lot of people are anxious to figure out how to get 3-D into the homes. The studios are spending 10 percent to 15 percent more on their production budgets to make these films and consumers are going to the theaters in droves," he said.

"More studios will make more 3-D films if they believe there's a home 3-D market, which is good for theaters too."

(Reporting by Sue Zeidler; Editing by Richard Chang)

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